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The Queerness of Saints: Inflecting Devotion and Same-Sex Desire

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When I was eleven or so, I took a vow of chastity. It might strike you as a rather excessive thing to do, and it undoubtedly was. But I was a little queer boy. What was I to do? How else could I both express and claim my sexual and my religious difference? Sure, I was pining away for my young saintly boyfriend, St. Dominic Savio, with his supposedly perfect record of bodily continence, and this vow was a way for us to seal our rather one-sided union on my part. I'm also sure that my Catholic guilt-induced feelings about the solitary sin of masturbation had something to do with it. Thankfully, a wise confessor eventually told me that I was too young to be bound by such a vow, thereby considerably reducing any good old fashioned guilt when I invariably touched myself again, as any teenager might.

What a queer thing to have done at eleven years old! I may smile about it now, but something was definitely at work back then. I knew instinctively that I was different from those other boys, both in terms of my emerging desires and my overly-intense piety, and this statement about my yearning for a chaste life—as immature and uncertain as it undoubtedly was—was clearly about performing and drawing meaning from this difference, and about entering into some form of

privileged relationship with a holy figure. I wanted *to become* like St. Dominic Savio. Not only did I also want him, but I vowed that I would not touch myself if I could not touch him. How pleasurable can such denial be, you may ask? Though my memory may be hazy, I suspect rather strongly that I drew a great deal of guilty (and not-so-guilty) pleasure from it. My not touching myself bonded St. Dominic Savio and me—and through us, the heavenly host of saintly men and women—in some holy, gratifying and queerly salvific way.

This paper examines devotion to saints as a means of queer affirmation in the Christian tradition. I do so by focusing on my own relationship to two figures from the Catholic calendar: St. Dominic Savio (1842-1857), a young Italian saint and student of St. John Bosco (1815-1888), and St. Peter Julian Eymard (1811-1868), known as the Apostle of the Eucharist and founder of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, whose seminary I attended in my youth. Both have been important to me, so this is primarily an exercise in queer self-reflection, but one which, it is hoped, will have wider appeal. My methodological cues are taken from Robert Orsi and Virginia Burrus, whose ground-breaking works on reading the erotic into saintly devotion have been so formative for so many of us. But first, I offer this quote on holiness from that queerest of all theologians, Marcella Althaus-Reid: “Holiness then becomes a category of the marginalized, when we consider that the saint is meant to be an outsider to society, not in the sense of failing to

participate actively in the political life of her community, but due to her dissenting role. It is participation in the transformation of the structures of society which marks the distance from the centres of order and power. This is Queer dissent, and divine dissent, as in prophetic or other models surrounding the idea of Holy women and men in popular spirituality.” (Quoted in Andy Buechel, *That We Might Become God: The Queerness of Creedal Christianity*, 85.) The saint and the queer inhabit a similar space of resistance. We are enshrined by our marginalities.

In my 2004 book, *Sanctity and Male Desire: A Gay Reading of Saints*, I wrote about Savio and Eymard. I offer the following two excerpts by way of a *mise en scène*: firstly, “Dominic Savio and I had two important things in common. We both wanted to be priests, and we both wanted to be saints. He never achieved the former, though he rather splendidly attained the latter. I went part of the way in the former, and, as for the latter, only time will tell (...) there was something else that I sensed about us, something unspoken yet deeply attractive. We were different from our young companions, more lonely, less rowdy, more focused on things ethereal and heavenly. In fact, we were both sissies, queer boys, and I suspect that each, in his own time and place, knew it in his innermost heart, as did those around us. Perhaps that is why I thought we were so much in love with each other.” (125-126); and secondly, “I was with a group whose very purpose was the adoration of, and devotion to, the Eucharistic body of Jesus himself, the most

perfectly desirable of all males. My closed seminary world was replete with young, beautiful male bodies: in the classrooms, showers, playing fields, and dormitories, but also in my moments of silent prayer before the exposed body of my God in the monstrance. (...) For me, Saint Peter Julian Eymard was the father, the guide, the path to follow. I saw myself (...) dedicating my life to the cult of the Eucharist. Though his spirituality appeared surreal and fantastic to us teenagers (there were stories of physical struggles with the devil near the end of his life), we sensed that his mission was our mission; his passion, our passion; his longing for communion with the divine body and blood, our longing.” (155 & 158)

Consider the crossings between these two passages: crossings of desire, most blatantly, but also crossings tied to some fairly orthodox Catholic motifs such as saintliness, priesthood and Eucharistic presence. Mine was nothing if not the path of Roman rectitude. But subverting all this—destabilizing it, as it were—was my incipient queerness, my ability to read desire and longing and craving into all this baroque religious baggage: to defiantly craft my emerging sexual self from such Catholic *bric-à-brac*. There is certainly nothing new about all this. Queers have been mincing around altars and statues for eons. And as Dominic James writes in *Visions of Queer Martyrdom*, “...the joys and sorrows of the ecclesiastical closet are not only important as an aspect of history, but reflect formative elements of the subject position of sexual nonconformists in modern society as a whole.” (29)

Dominic Savio saved me. He made it possible for me to understand, almost instinctively and without shame, that I could love other boys and still be a faithful follower of Jesus. Perhaps the two figures were even conflated in my young and impressionable mind. Perhaps I saw them as mirroring each other, and I was caught in a web of pleasurable desire between them. Perhaps I thought that we three formed a sort of queer Trinity, and that this was as it should be. Contrary to many gay men who have grown up in Christian churches, I have seldom, if ever, felt that acute and insurmountable tension between my desires and my religious yearnings. For me, these two have always been seamless. And it was this earliest, most important saintly figure in my life, Dominic Savio, who made that possible for me. My devotion to him was the means by which I “clued into” my innate sense of devotion to, and appreciation for, the bodies of other males. I certainly knew that this was where my interests lay; I just needed to have it affirmed, and that young Italian saint, that paragon of youthful piety, was there to encourage me.

There was something else that Dominic Savio taught me, and that was the painful joy and defiant beauty of difference: sissified difference; book-wormish difference; the difference of the pious and devout. He himself was all those things, and he became a saint not in spite of them, but because of them. These were the attributes of his personality that Don Bosco wrote about in the biography that got him canonized. Of course, ‘a sissified difference’ was not among them, but it most

certainly was if you were able to read between the lines. Which I did, in spades, and repeatedly. I even tried imitating some of Dominic's saintly gestures—by not touching myself, of course, but also by stepping into a fight between two boys, or even, as I vaguely recall, by warning my playmates of the dangers of talking dirty. I cringe now in thinking about such things, but all this also made it possible for me to claim my difference by mimicking the difference of Dominic Savio. And that difference, grounded as it was in my sense of devotion to the young saint, became, in practice, actually quite normalized, almost necessary, as it were. It was a source of confident pleasure, with the whiff of a God-given calling. I'm not sure I could have separated, at that time, my calling to the priesthood from my emerging same-sex desire. I'm still not sure that I can, as I now both a priest and an out gay man.

Saints can therefore deeply mould us. They can fashion, and shape, and create us in many ways, and perhaps never more so than when we are at a liminal stage in our lives. If saints are the resisters and marginalized ones that Althaus-Reid claims they are—and I agree with her—then those truly exceptional sites of resistance and queer dissent should be what we call home. Why? Because these are places and figures of queer becoming and belonging in the deepest sense of the word. It is with and through these holy figures that we learn about desire, that we dare to conflate pleasure and holiness, and that we come to see ourselves as blessed in the eyes of God. It was the desirable St. Dominc Savio who brought me there.

Peter Julian Eymard was all about the Eucharist in its vast and delicious array of manifestations in Catholic devotional culture. In fact, he was all about the specifically Eucharistic male body and its adoration. At that time in its collective life, perpetual adoration of the exposed host was the Congregation's prime source of spiritual identity and practice, as was the notion of divine kingship. In the Congregation's houses throughout the world, including the minor seminary where I was a student, there were garish thrones of Eucharistic adoration, royal mantles surmounted by a crown. The monstrance stood in the centre. Religious were expected to spend two hours per day, and one hour at night, in contemplative prayer before the host. Vowed priests and brothers wore a simple image of a cloth monstrance on their cassocks over their hearts. We even had our own variation of the Madonna: Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament. Through this omnipresent and rich devotional visual environment, we were quite intentionally being trained as future adorers of the Eucharistic body, and expected to become vigilant guardians of the holy flesh. One of our models was St. Tarcisus, a young Roman altar server who chose to be martyred rather than allow the consecrated host he was carrying to imprisoned Christians to be desecrated.

What appealed powerfully to me in this closed world of Eucharistic fervour was its corporeal emphasis: the daily taking and ingesting of consecrated flesh; the prostration before exposed, though hidden, royal flesh; the daily intimate, almost

promiscuous cohabitation of human male flesh with that of the flesh of Jesus in the bread (there was less of an emphasis on the wine). Of course, other sorts of rather more prosaic flesh inhabited this somatic world: the pungent flesh of rambunctious and desirable boys most notably. Perhaps the smells and sights and sounds of this flesh were conflated in my mind with the hallowed flesh of the altar or the kingly throne of exposition. Perhaps my youthful senses were stimulated and pleased equally by both. Perhaps, in my more secret and guarded moments, I desired both in the same way. In fact, I know I did. I may not have been able to put words to this budding clandestine desire, but it delighted and excited me. The comfortable world of St. Peter Julian Eymard and his army of Eucharistic adorers enveloped me safely, a sort of defiantly queer embrace. Seminary was my school for desire.

The Eucharistic ardour of our fatherly founder provided the template for our own flights of Eucharistic fancy. Were we good enough adorers, worthy sons of his own passionate and single-minded devotion to the Blessed Sacrament? Saints can and do inspire. It was from my time with the Congregation that I formed a strong Eucharistic spirituality, one that takes quite seriously the fact of the bodily presence of God at the heart of the Christian faith. Such a holy bodily presence, however, was not limited to the material elements of bread and wine. It tended to spill over into the beauty and availability of other physical bodies, ever resplendent in their own Eucharistic transubstantiation into sites of gloriously deviant longing.

In *The Sex Lives of Saints*, Virginia Burrus writes: “This is the secret of sanctity: to play the harlot; to defy the law of sexuality and submit to the rule of seduction; constantly to raise the stakes in a game that never ends. The romancing of the harlot is thus also the romancing of God. (Is it even possible that “God is a whore,” as Bataille suggests?) “One *seduces* God with faith, and He cannot but respond, for seduction, like the challenge, is a reversible form. And He responds a hundredfold by His grace to the challenge of faith.” Seduction is God’s challenge to the saint and also the saint’s challenge to God—the very wager of all theology, as well as all asceticism.” (158-159) Burrus is talking here of the hagiographies of holy harlots, such as Pelagia of Antioch and Mary of Egypt, but her words express well the remarkable capacity of saints to enter into a dance of seduction with God.

Robert Orsi, in his book *Between Heaven and Earth*, says something similar, though more sociologically-oriented in tone: “Presence is central to the study of lived Catholic practice—the study of Catholicism in everyday life is about the mutual engagement of men, women, children, and holy figures present to each other. (...) The materialization of religious worlds includes a process that might be called the corporalization of the sacred. I mean by this the practice of rendering the invisible visible by constituting it as an experience in a body—in one’s own body or in someone else’s body—so that the experiencing body itself becomes the bearer of presence for oneself and for others.” (73 & 74)

By way of conclusion, I return to my beginning, to my youthful foray into the delicious pleasure and pain of an undefiled body, to this holy intimacy I sought to create with an attractive young saint, to my queer desire to present myself as a chaste offering to my God. Seduction and “corporalization” were most certainly both at work in my vow. I wanted to make Dominic Savio love me, be like him, to respond in a way similar to his to the seductive and compelling touch of the sacred. But I was simultaneously inscribing onto my body the values, desires and hopes of a certain Catholic devotional culture, one that fully expected its young boys to live pure lives. My relationship with Dominic Savio was thereby being inscribed onto my body—made somatically and spiritually real, as it were—through the exquisite pleasure of denying my bodily urges. In a similar way, my adoration of the divine body in the exposed host, following the model of Peter Julian Eymard, moved me into the orbit of other exposed masculine flesh, conflating my desire for holiness and my desire for same-sex delights, inflecting it with a subversive queer potential.

The queerness of saints, their innate ability to open up spaces of unspoken desire, their edgy marginal presence in our churches and communities, their knack for living at the liminal extremes of religious and cultural spaces and possibilities: all these can become sites for the affirmation and celebration of same-sex desire in the broad Christian tradition. Saints are nothing if not the most outrageous of all seducers; we need to abandon ourselves to their playful and frisky games of desire.